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Walter Heitler, senior professor 1945–49.

**Addresses**

1941–1949 21 Seapark Road, Clontarf, Dublin  
1949–1958 Drusbergstrasse 59, Zürich  
1958–1981 Am Guggenberg 5, Zürich

**WALTER HEITLER**

*Physicist*

1904–1981

**Born:** Karlsruhe, 2 January 1904

**Died:** Zürich, 15 November 1981

**Family:**

Son of Adolf and Otille (née Rudolf) Heitler

Married: Kathleen Nicholson 1942

Children: One son, Eric

**Distinctions:**

Membership of the following academies:

Royal Irish 1943, Royal Society 1948,  
Leopoldina in Halle 1968, Mainz 1970,  
Norwegian 1974

Honorary doctorates of National University of  
Ireland 1954, University of Göttingen,  
University of Uppsala

Medals: Max Planck 1968, Marcel Benoist Prize  
1970, Literaturpreis der Stiftung für  
Abendländische Besinnung 1977, Gold  
Medal of Humboldt Gesellschaft 1979

Walter Heitler was born in Karlsruhe, Baden, Germany, of a Bohemian-Jewish family, nearly all of whom perished in the Nazi holocaust. His early education was classical but, at about the age of eleven, he began to develop a personal interest in the natural sciences. He studied at universities in Karlsruhe, Berlin and Munich, where he took his Ph.D. degree under the supervision of Herzfeld. After a brief stay in Copenhagen he arrived in Zürich just a few months before Schrödinger left for Berlin in 1927. Having mastered Schrödinger's papers on quantum mechanics he set about applying them to calculate the Van der Waals interaction between two atoms. He collaborated with another research worker Fritz London and the result was the Heitler-London theory of chemical bond.

In 1927 Heitler went to Göttingen as assistant to Max Born. When Hitler came to power in 1933, Heitler left Germany for Bristol where he remained until he transferred to Dublin in 1941. In the meantime he had been recognised as the world's leading authority on the quantum theory of radiation. In Dublin he devoted his energies to the theory of the newly discovered particle whose mass was about two hundred times that of electron—now called the muon. He gathered about himself an active group that included J. Hamilton, N. Hu, S.T. Ma, H.W. Peng, S.C. Power and P. Walsh. Though Schrödinger and Heitler were together in Zürich and Dublin, their research interests at any time did not coincide. Heitler became an Irish citizen in 1946 and retained Irish citizenship when he left for Zürich in 1949.

One of Heitler's regrets in his latter years was that he had chosen to specialise in physics rather than in biology or philosophy. Of his seven books, four deal with philosophy and religion, and he died a member of the Swiss Reformed Church. The number of his scientific papers exceeds eighty. It was a matter of surprise to his contemporaries that Heitler was not awarded the Nobel Prize.

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